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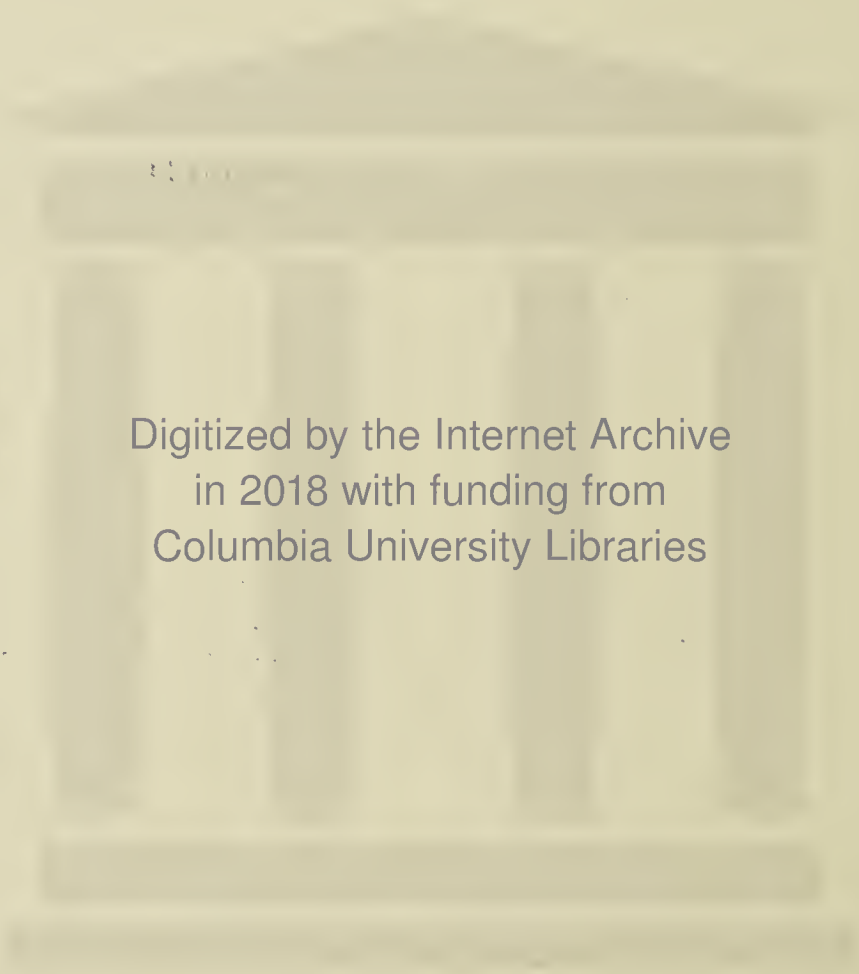
THE WEST INDIES

AS SEEN BY A

Christian Statesman

A brief review of the economic, social, and religious situation in the West Indies, by William Oxley Thompson, D.D., Moderator of the General Assembly, 1926-1927.



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THE WEST INDIES AS SEEN BY A CHRISTIAN STATESMAN

An Englishman once remarked to me that he always had been glad that England was an island. This required the English people, as he said, to think in world terms. They were bound to measure themselves by the service they rendered to others. It was obvious that the island itself could not live and sustain a progressive civilization unless it made desirable and profitable contacts with the outlying world. This remark is probably the key to situations in England other than the economic or the industrial. It has, doubtless, affected her international relations and, to a considerable degree, her colonial policy.

There was a day, however, when this was not true. All nations seemed to proceed upon the theory of exploitation. Among these, Spain should not be overlooked. For four hundred years, she had complete colonial control over the West Indies, Haiti excepted; likewise, these islands enjoyed the theory of a single church. Denominational zeal and rivalry had no place in their program. During a considerable portion of this time, if not for all of it, there was a sufficient coordination of both Church and State to make possible joint enterprises. I was told, for example, by intelligent citizens that churches were built just as bridges were, that is to say, out of public revenues. Every Protestant

church in the world has been built by voluntary contributions—a most significant difference.

As one travels through these islands, abundant evidences are seen of the commanding place the Spanish occupied in the control and direction of the activities of the people. A great fort, such as we see at Havana, represented in those days an enormous undertaking. Labor, materials and construction were of the most permanent sort. They are without value at the present. These were associated with Spanish castles, the homes of the "grandees," as they are sometimes called. The remnants of the original road through these islands show skill in civil engineering and no end of available labor. One would readily suppose that a people with such capacity, such financial resources, such engineering ability would soon have discovered a wiser and more modern policy in these islands than was ever developed.

It is to be noted that the islands are filled with populations quite as large as the methods of cultivation can support. In fact, an island like Porto Rico recognizes that it is overpopulated. The industrial opportunity is not sufficient to maintain a larger population and there is little prospect that a diversity of modern industry will ever be sufficient to warrant any considerable increase in the population. In Cuba, the situation is somewhat better because the "Pearl of the Antilles" is the richest in productive power, resources and available wealth. Haiti represents today the deepest poverty and probably gives promise of the least attractive immediate future. Whether these hookworm-ridden, lethargic people, a mingling of Spanish and African blood, with medieval French civilization, can be transformed into enterprising, ambitious toilers for trade remains to be seen. The investment of millions by others than the people themselves

will be necessary before even transportation will be possible. The splendid highway from Port au Prince to Santo Domingo is the first effort toward this end. Conditions are better in the eastern portion of the island where the Dominican Republic holds governmental sway; here Spanish traditions prevail. This is a naturally rich area, profuse in its production, but handicapped by the long period of slavery and suppression.

Porto Rico, in the fortunes of the Spanish-American war, came to the United States and is now a detached portion of our territory. Technically, it is an unorganized territory. Certain officials appointed by the President of the United States furnish our contact with this beautiful and attractive island. The inauguration of the American public school system was a most significant beginning. The establishment of certain political machinery gave Porto Rico at least the forms of government provided for in our constitution. It is reported, however, that these Porto Rican people, ambitious for self-government, neglect the ballot even more than the people in the States with longer experience. The result is that a supervising government seems a necessity. In Cuba, where an independent republic was another outcome of the Spanish-American war, we have a struggle toward self-realization and self-government, with the United States Government lying to the North ready to intervene under the Platt Amendment, in case necessity should arise. This is a sort of insurance against the emergencies of inexperience.

There are, however, certain conditions common to all these islands which may be regarded as the legitimate result of the four centuries of exploitation both by State and Church. There are the extremes of wealth and poverty. There are the abundant provisions for the necessities and conveniences of the rich, with

an almost total lack of provision for the needs of the poor. The theory seems to have obtained that the servant was for the convenience of the master. The poor could exercise the grace of gratitude for small favors presumably thankfully received. Ownership of the soil naturally drifted into the hands of the more favored class. The direction of energies was always within their control. The Church seems to have been no better than the State. So far as these people were served at all in the matters of religion, it was through an imported priesthood, schooled in Spanish traditions, with no definite plan for the progress of the people. In too many cases, this priesthood was a temporary, passing experience, returning to the native country at their own pleasure, or when the accumulation of funds assured them of a more congenial, ecclesiastical fellowship in their native country. Under these conditions, the neglect of the people does not describe the situation. The situation, therefore, in a land like these islands, where Nature is lavish with her fruits and products, affords an easy opportunity for the combination of luxury and poverty, of virtue and vice, and of a moral situation intolerable to any mind having a just conception either of the Church or State. Both these agencies lacked the outlook of public welfare or of a sound theory of either religion or politics.

As a consequence, we find the great majority, particularly in the rural districts, exposed to the evils of hookworm, tuberculosis, and diseases due to the vices of men. The entailments of these diseases upon a people, anaemic both by disease and poverty, render any public progress impossible until a thorough reorganization takes place at the base of society. The sanitary conditions, or rather the lack of sanitary conditions, the lack of local water supply, and the limited food supply, together with an enervating

climate, make the situation less hopeful than one might desire. This is fundamentally the reason for providing, in the very first instance, both cleanliness and godliness.

The American occupation which came after the Spanish-American war provided the first opportunity for an organized effort on the part of the Protestant forces to join with the United States Government in doing the essential, foundation things precedent to all progress. Spain had never developed the initiative or individual powers of the people. They knew nothing of the freedom so essential to political integrity and even the Church had treated the people simply as beneficiaries. It was, in a sense, a pay-as-you-go policy. If they did not have the price, they did not pay. The advance in prices oftentimes rendered a home on earth and a home in Heaven alike an impossibility. The natural result is that illegitimacy competed with legitimacy. The moral confusion arising from such unauthorized mingling of the sexes led quite naturally to a degeneration of all social idealism. From the religious point of view, the Church was a method of escape rather than an opportunity for a better life.

The Church, like the State, during these four centuries failed to develop the native talent of public or professional service. It never seems to have occurred to the Church that a native priesthood would be an asset to the Church. The patronizing policy of a foreign priesthood seems to have been regarded as adequate to the situation. However, when the Protestant forces entered, the policy was immediately changed. They introduced as the very basis of society the theory of individual development. We are quite apt to think of this as the legitimate outcome of the Christian point of view. It appears not to have been so with our Catholic brethren. The Protestant point of view was, and is,

the development of the individual. This means, of course, the moral responsibility of every individual to God. It means his equality with his own brother at the throne of grace; it means his own initiative in spiritual living; it means the mastery of his own conscience, since God alone is Lord of the conscience; it means a certain freedom, not only spiritually, but socially and otherwise. What may be termed a Protestant view of Christianity makes for strong individuals while urging with tremendous emphasis the obligations of brotherly kindliness and the opportunity for organized cooperation. The mutual burden-bearing which fulfills the law of Christ is an ever-present opportunity. The gospel of helpfulness is consistent only with respect for the integrity of the individual.

As a result of this new theory in these islands, the Protestant forces began the erection of churches, the organization of the people, the fundamental teaching in the Sunday school, and in other schools to a limited degree or as a temporary measure until the government forces should make adequate provision and, in general, the development of the social and moral ideals common to the Protestant forces in the United States.

As a fruit of these endeavors, one can now see in every Protestant center an improved condition as to health, as to social ideals, as to an appreciation of the integrity of the home, the unity of the family, not to mention the maintenance of standards of personal virtue. The release of new energy through the agency of the Protestant churches has found an expression in spiritual, moral, and industrial idealism quite in harmony with the finest spirit of progress among Protestant peoples anywhere on the earth. This revelation demonstrates our opportunity. If we are in earnest in our desire to see these people come forward and take

their places in a modern civilization, the development of character and of idealism lies at the very basis of all our activities. The danger is, as always, from the commercialization of our ideals either in politics or industry, or both. The missionary spirit in the Church is the key to progress and the solution of the problems of ignorance, dependency and disease. This spiritual impulse may find expression through hospital service or a school service administered by the State or under the forms of secular government. The beneficient results, however, should still be credited to the original missionary and Christian impulse with the upward and forward look. The Protestant churches, therefore, are entitled to know that their representatives have been laying foundations, have been planting fruit-bearing trees, and have been doing a lot of other things that have borne no evil fruits. The stimulus has been so strong that everywhere in Porto Rico today Protestantism bears a good name. This is true also in Cuba and in other places in the West Indies.

A brief generation of experience has demonstrated clearly that the supreme need of these people was spiritual illumination. The bread and butter philosophy of some current economics has been set aside. We have demonstrated that the gospel of Christ can be preached to the poor with power and efficiency. It was the gospel first and an improved social order afterward. This makes it entirely clear that the fundamental need in a mission field is the cross of Christ. The preacher should have his church in order to bring this gospel clearly and forcibly to the people. The philosophy that would begin with a mowing machine or a tractor does not meet the situation. The greatest asset in the West Indies today is a competent, conscientious and clear-headed missionary of Christ.

The Protestant churches have done fairly well in the erection of buildings. They have not done so well as one might desire. It is not improper to keep in mind that in our missionary endeavor the church building representing Protestanism, while not competing with cathedrals, should, at the same time, be suggestive of reverence, of respect for religion, of self-respect among the people, and of such strength as would give the consciousness of stability to the people. The worst possible extravagance for the Protestant churches would be a carelessly constructed church building. The appeal, therefore, that comes from such a group as the Union Church in Havana should meet a cordial response from individual Christian people abundantly able to honor God and serve their generation in assisting to construct a suitable house of worship for the English-speaking people, many of whom are only temporarily resident. The situation in San Juan is somewhat different, but essentially the same. If it is not true at present, it soon will be true that a similar situation will be developed in the city centers throughout the West Indies. Furthermore, throughout the rural district, which includes, of course, villages and small cities, the need for the church building is quite imperative, the ability locally to provide such buildings is markedly less. This situation and the call for a capital account should in no way interfere with our gifts for ordinary current expenses and the further development of Protestant opportunities.

The second charactertistic feature of the Protestant movement has been the development of a native ministry. It was my pleasure to meet and greet a large number of these men as it is now my pleasure to testify to their efficiency. One sees everywhere the evidence of Christian evangelism and pastoral care. They have developed organizations reasonably adequate to the needs

of the local church. They are steadily learning the lesson of co-operation between churches and the value of organized Christianity. They are, in a way, the pioneer men of the West Indies. Whatever of supervision has been provided from the United States has always been consistent with the greatest local development of the native ministry. Much could be said in appreciation of and in praise of, the representatives of Protestantism who have given years of service in these islands. The attitude of the people toward the church and their happiness in the service is most gratifying.

Mention should be made perhaps of the effort originally made by the women of the Presbyterian Church for the erection of hospitals and the provision of medical service so much needed throughout the West Indies. The Presbyterian Hospital at San Juan is perhaps the outstanding institution among such endeavors. Here one observes the presence of native Porto Rican girls trained as professional nurses; also native Porto Rican young men as internes: the Protestant forces brought a new conception of the service of the gospel to these islands. Beautiful for location, well-appointed for professional service, with a clinic accommodating an average of one thousand persons per week, the hospital needs an ample and suitable home for nurses. Some generous soul is much needed in the interests of suffering humanity and a highly efficient service to meet this need.

One should not overlook the fact that an Evangelical Theological Seminary for the education and preparation of young men for the ministry and for other forms of Christian service is a commanding force for Protestantism among these people. The privilege of addressing a group of about seventy-five men preparing for the ministry was highly appreciated. A conference

showed clearly the moral enthusiasm and spiritual earnestness of these young men. We are in the way of developing a competent native ministry that in the future will be able to carry on throughout these islands. In other words, under present policies, we are engaged in a temporary rather than an age-long service. Unless we shall fail of our opportunity, there will be in the West Indies a native church equipped with native ministry and operated through native intelligence. This is the great goal of the Protestant Church. No fanciful theories of organized church union need occupy our minds for the present. The substantial unity, however, of all Protestant forces in these islands and the spirit of cooperation already well developed give great promise for the future.

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